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Attractive work on Soweto – for everybody living in South Africa today

PHILIP BONNER & LAUREN SEGAL,  
*Soweto A History*.  
Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1998.  
ISBN 0 636 03033 4  
162 pages, Illustrated.  
Price: R79-95

VIDEO SERIES:  
Director: Angus Gibson  
Producer: Nicola Galombik  
*Soweto A History*  
Channel Four Television (UK) and  
SBS Television (Australia)  
Distributors: Film Resource Unit,  
P.O. Box 11065  
Johannesburg  
Price: R249-00

The name “Soweto” is an international household word but, staggeringly, a systematic history of the place and its people has never been attempted. *Soweto A History* makes no claim to fill this gap. Indeed, with a total length of 162 pages, of which almost half is taken up by photographs, it could hardly hope to do so. It is, however, a very welcome beginning. It also serves as a useful introduction to Sowetan history for both academics and society-at-large. What adds considerably to the book’s value is that it is supplemented by a video series, originally conceived of at the Wits History Workshop, which adds a further and most appropriate dimension to the work. This visual dimension succeeds far better than any other medium in bringing home the reality of Soweto to those who have not experienced it for themselves. (It also succeeds in evoking animated reminiscing from those who have.)

The series consists of six separate episodes, each 26 minutes long. This amounts to a total viewing time of just over two-and-a quarter hours. Each episode is a

complete video in itself, focussing on a specific period or theme, which is most convenient for didactic purposes. At the same time, the episodes do gel together and can be viewed in a single sitting.

The authors' claim that the book is based on the video, but, more accurately, it seems to be based on the research undertaken for the video series. This is important as it makes the video more than a visual representation of the printed text. Naturally, there is a considerable overlap between the two works, but there are also significant differences which make them parallel, rather than identical works. The book begins briefly with the history of Black residence in the slumyards of early Johannesburg and Soweto's humble beginnings as the Klipspruit Township (later Pimville) in 1905. It moves on to span Soweto's origins as a collection of townships and squatters' camps, its growth, establishment and rise to fame in 1976 and the 1980's and, finally, to infamy in the early 1990's.

The video series was undoubtedly strongly influenced by two factors: the scarcity of visual sources representing aspects of Soweto's early years and the likely interests of a typical Channel Four or SBS TV audience. As a result, its coverage of the origins and development of Soweto until the 1970's is somewhat sketchy, although the content does more or less follow that of the book. A notable characteristic of the video series is that it pays considerable attention to political history and specifically to the history of Black resistance politics in Soweto within the context of the rise and fall of Apartheid, a theme to which visual representation is admirably suited. The visual medium succeeds in conveying the horrific nature of the political violence and repression infinitely more forcefully than any description could.

In many ways the series focuses on the 1976 uprisings and the repression, political activity and renewed uprisings that followed over the next decade. From this point of view, social historians, especially those familiar with Bonner's work will probably find the video a little disappointing, although it does include fascinating portrayals of some aspects of Sowetan social life.

The video suffers from the need to satisfy the demands of commercial television in that its perspective is strongly orientated towards the views held by the people of Soweto and against the officials and governments of the time. The most notable attention paid to the official view comes in the form of brief comments made in an interview with Wilhelm Carr, the Manager of Non-European Affairs for Johannesburg during the 1950's and 1960's. To more sympathetic eyes, these almost comic (and so doubly tragic) clips may seem to come close to a parody of the official point of view at that time. On the other hand, much of the official position and utterances of the 1950's and 1960's does seem tragically ludicrous in the light of hindsight.

To some extent, these criticisms are addressed in the book, which pays more attention to the social aspects of life than the video does. Bonner's expert knowledge is obvious in discussions of Mpanza's squatter movements, hostel life and even more in the treatment of the aspirations of Soweto's people, fashion and style in Soweto, the rise and activities of the gangs and so forth. Both works also note the influence of consciousness, politics, international affairs and ideology on Sowetan worldviews, politics and resistance activities and integrate them with material circumstances. This enables the reader and viewer to achieve a sophisticated and credible understanding of the Soweto uprisings. However, an omission that deserves

comment is the lack of attention paid to the roles of religion and the churches in Sowetan daily life and resistance. Even in a time of increasing secularisation, it is hard to imagine life or politics in Soweto without religious and ecclesiastical involvement.

A related point which can be made is that, in common with almost everything that has been written on Black history in South Africa, both the video and the book tend to emphasise sensational aspects of Black social life – crime, conflict, resistance and the like. In the light of subsequent events, one cannot deny the importance of these themes, but they are certainly not the only characteristics of Sowetan life. This reader's experience is that the vast majority of Sowetans are thoroughly respectable, law-abiding people who have been and still are concerned to protect and maintain their values and lifestyle in the face of political, economic, social and material hardship. In the light of contemporary challenges such as crime and fragmented value systems, the lives of these "unsung heroes" of Soweto are socially very relevant. To be fair, however, both the video and the book do pay more attention to the positive aspects of Sowetan life than most of the existing body of literature. These include the resourcefulness with which people coped with adversity, the attempts to assert the rule of law and order through the institution of an urban form of the traditional *Makgotla* and the strong communal and neighbourly attitudes and actions people displayed towards one another.

It is important not to take these criticisms too seriously. Clearly, *Soweto A History* (both video and book) was never intended to be a definitive academic work. Nor should the book and video be judged as one. Properly understood, this adds to, rather than detracts from the historiographical significance and the usefulness and value of the works. Both the video series and the book belong very much to the genre of "Public History". They are history, not "from below", but "from within". In other words, the book (and the video) is intended to document, represent and expand *existing* popular historical consciousness of Soweto in general. In particular, it deals with the historical consciousness of Sowetans and those who identify with them.

Bonner and Segal have set out to produce a book that is easily accessible to those not used to reading history books, attractive to those who want to read about the South African liberation struggle and relevant to the concerns of everybody living in South Africa today. In terms of these aims, the book especially, creates an extremely favourable impression. Both book and video will be particularly useful to those who teach local history at secondary school and undergraduate levels as well as to outsiders with an interest in the recent South African past. Both the book and the video are strongly recommended.

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